

1958 *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*

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Gresham M. Sykes

The *Society of Captives* is one of the most important books ever written about prison as well as a startlingly original contribution to our thinking about punishment and social control in general. The book transformed how we understand the psychological and organizational dynamics of prison life, and has become a classic of modern criminology.

Gresham Sykes wrote the book at the height of the Cold War, motivated by the world's experience of fascism and communism to study the closest thing to a totalitarian system in American life: a maximum security prison. The book is remarkably short—just 150 pages—but bristles with ideas. Sykes argued that many of the psychological effects of modern prison are even more brutal than the physical cruelties of the past. The trauma of being designated one of the very worst human beings in the world left prisoners with lifelong scars. It also inspired solidarity among prisoners and fierce resistance to authorities as strategies for rejecting those who rejected them. His analysis called into question whether prisons genuinely were, as many believed, “total institutions,” where every facet of life was rigidly controlled. Sykes showed that the stronger the bonds among prisoners, the more difficult it was for prison guards to run the prisons without finding ways of “accommodating” the prisoners.

The book set the stage for Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, among other works. Since it appeared in 1958, it has served society as an indispensable text in coming to terms with the nature of modern power.

